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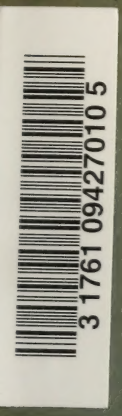

THE NAVY AND THE WAR

(AUGUST, 1914 to AUGUST, 1915).

BY

Balfour
Arthur James
(1848-1930)

The RIGHT HON. A. J. BALFOUR,
FIRST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY.

LONDON:
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On the 31st July, 1915, the First Lord of the Admiralty addressed the following letter to Mr. Tuohy of the *New York World* :—

" July 31, 1915.

" DEAR MR. TUOHY,—

" I AM obliged to you for showing me a copy of the communication from Count Reventlow entitled ' A Year of Naval Warfare,' which has just been published in the *New York World*. I am not quite sure that I comprehend the purpose with which it has been written, but in accordance with your desire I am making a few observations upon its contents.

" The introductory paragraph calls for no comment from me. Count Reventlow explains why the German Fleet was not completed during the 15 years which have elapsed since the first Navy Bill, and recounts some of the political miscalculations of the German Government through which, as he believes, the German Fleet in the North Sea has been put in a position of numerical inferiority. These are points on which perhaps Count Reventlow speaks with authority; in any case they only concern his own country. But when he incidentally declares that England ' desired to attack Germany,' he blunders into a controversy where he will hardly receive so respectful a hearing. The world, though he may not know it, has long made up its mind as to who is the aggressor in the present war; and I should have thought it hardly worth his while to repeat such charges outside the limits of the German Empire.

" The main purpose, however, of Count Reventlow's communication is to praise the performances of the German Fleet; and certainly it is no purpose of mine to belittle the courage or the skill of the sailors composing it. I doubt not that they have done all that was possible both in the honourable warfare to which doubtless they were inclined, and in the dishonourable warfare required of them by their superiors. But what, in this the first

year of the war, have they accomplished by either method? He tells us that we—the British—have failed to induce the German Fleet to come out and fight us—and certainly we have. So far the German Fleet has thought it wise to avoid engaging a superior force, and I am the last person to blame them. But this surely is hardly to be counted as a triumph of either tactics or strategy; it is a military exploit which, however judicious, would be well within the competence of the least efficient fleet and the most incapable commander.

"The truth is that the German High Sea Fleet has so far done nothing, and probably has not been in a position to do anything. At the beginning of the war we were told that by a process of continual attrition it was proposed to reduce the superior British Fleet ship by ship until an equality was established between the two antagonists. The design has completely failed. The desired equality is more remote than it was 12 months ago; and this would be true even if certain extraordinary mis-statements about such small actions as have occurred in the North Sea had any foundation in fact. He tells us, for example, that in the skirmish of August 28, when some German cruisers were destroyed, the English squadron suffered heavy damage. This is quite untrue. He tells us, again, that in the skirmish of January 24 last when the 'Blücher' was sunk, the British lost a new battle cruiser (the 'Tiger'). This is also untrue. In that engagement we did not lose a cockle boat. I do not know that these mis-statements are of any great moment. But for the benefit of those who think otherwise, let me say that in no sea fight, except that off the coast of Chile, has any ship of the English Fleet been either sunk or seriously damaged.

"Apart from these purely imaginary triumphs, the only performance of German warships in the North Sea on which Count Reventlow dwells with pride and satisfaction is the attack by some German cruisers on undefended towns in Yorkshire. This exploit was as inglorious as it was immoral. Two or three fast cruisers came over the North Sea by night; at dawn they bombarded an open watering-place; they killed a certain number of civilian men, women, and children; and, after an hour and a half of this gallant performance, retired to the safety of their own defended waters. Personally, I

think it better to invent stories like the sinking of the 'Tiger' than to boast of such a feat of arms as this.

"But in truth, if anyone will examine Count Reventlow's apology for the German High Sea Fleet, he will find that it amounts to no more than praise of German mines and German submarines. There is no doubt that German mines, scattered at random and with no warning to neutrals, have been responsible for the destruction of much neutral shipping and of some vessels of war. The first result is deplorable; the second is legitimate. Mine-laying is not, indeed, a very glorious method of warfare; though, used against warships, it is perfectly fair. But something more must be said about submarines. Anybody reading Count Reventlow's observations would suppose that submarines were a German invention, and that only German foresight had realised that their use would necessitate a modification in battle fleet tactics. But this truth has been among the commonplaces of naval knowledge for years past, and was no more hid from Washington and London than from Berlin and Vienna. What was new in the German use of submarines was not their employment against ships of war, but their employment against defenceless merchantmen and unarmed trawlers. This, it must be owned, was never foreseen either in Washington or London. It is purely German. But Count Reventlow is profoundly mistaken if he supposes that, during the year which has elapsed, these murderous methods have affected in the slightest degree the economic life of England; what they *have* done is to fix an indelible stain upon the fair fame of the German Navy.

"If any one desires to know whether the British Fleet has during the last year proved itself worthy of its traditions, there is a very simple method of arriving at the truth. There are seven, and only seven, functions which a fleet can perform:—

"It may drive the enemy's commerce off the sea.

"It may protect its own commerce.

"It may render the enemy's fleet impotent.

"It may make the transfer of enemy troops across the sea impossible, whether for attack or defence.

"It may transport its own troops where it will.

"It may secure their supplies, and (in fitting circumstances) it may assist their operations.

" All these functions have so far been successfully performed by the British Fleet. No German merchant ship is to be found on the ocean. Allied commerce is more secure from attack, legitimate and illegitimate, than it was after Trafalgar. The German High Sea Fleet has not as yet ventured beyond the security of its protected waters. No invasion has been attempted of these islands. British troops, in numbers unparalleled in history, have moved to and fro across the seas, and have been effectively supported on shore. The greatest of military Powers has seen its colonies wrested from it one by one, and has not been able to land a man or a gun in their defence. Of a fleet which has done this we may not only say that it has done much, but that no fleet has ever done more. And we citizens of the British Empire can only hope that the second year of the war will show no falling off in its success, as it will assuredly show no relaxation of its efforts.

" Pray believe me, yours faithfully,

" ARTHUR JAMES BALFOUR."

Appended is the communication from Count Reventlow to which Mr. Balfour refers and replies :—

"A YEAR OF NAVAL WARFARE.

"By Count Ernst zu Reventlow.

"When, a year ago, the German Fleet entered the great contest, it was not in a state of completion, as many persons abroad believe it to have been. At that time the German Fleet had been for some 15 years in the process of being regularly built up, for the big Navy Bill had not become a law until the summer of 1900. In that year the German Navy contained only two somewhat modern battleships. It was calculated at that time that the rebuilding of the Fleet would be completed in 1920. In 1906, however, came the great Dreadnought revolution in shipbuilding which quickly rendered worthless all ships built before that time (pre-Dreadnoughts), and compelled tremendous enlargements of wharves, harbours, and canals, gigantic extension of organisation, &c. The work of completing the German Fleet would have extended itself far beyond the year 1920 under these conditions. If one furthermore takes into consideration that, as the authorities of all lands acknowledge, experience shows that it requires not 15 but 30 years to build up a fleet with everything that belongs thereto, on water and on land, it is clear that the German Fleet was far from being ready in the summer of 1914. And to this must be added a fact that has been overlooked: in 1900, when the strength of the German Fleet was decided on, the relations of England to France and to Russia were bad. England had to maintain strong fleets in the Mediterranean and in East Asia. The alliance with Japan was not yet in existence. If these conditions had persisted, Great Britain could have used only a part of its fleet in a war with Germany. Since, however, Great Britain desired to attack Germany when the proper time came, it allied itself at the right moment with Russia, France, and Japan, and was thus able to use its entire fleet against Germany and Germany's allies from August, 1914, on. Then, in the course of the war, Italy came in with its considerable fleet. The allies of Great Britain also employ their fleets in the home waters and on the seas against Germany and its allies. And since, as is well known, the fleets of Austria-Hungary and Turkey are very small, the German Fleet has had to battle during the last 12 months against an extraordinarily superior might. What has the German Fleet achieved in this year, what has it lost, according to what plan has it fought?

"Let us begin with the last question: According to what plan has the German Fleet fought? In the home waters two enemies were to be considered—Russia in the Baltic, Great Britain in and beyond the North Sea. In view of the number of Russian ships in Baltic harbours, the Russian Fleet could by no means be taken lightly. Since the fall of 1914 a half dozen English submarines have been stationed in the Baltic. Therefore it was necessary to leave a portion of the German Fleet there, and to be steadily prepared to employ still more forces in the Baltic should

occasion arise. The greatest part of the German Fleet lay, of course, in the North Sea. It was from the beginning impossible to prevent the isolation of Germany from the oceans; for, on the one hand, the German North Sea harbours, above all, the basis of operations of the German Fleet, are too far distant from the English Channel and the northern passage from the North Sea, to make it possible to keep these open, and, on the other hand, the German Fleet was and is much too small. At the beginning of the war, and especially after Great Britain had taken over the warships being built in British shipyards for other nations, the German Fleet was hardly half as strong as the British. The British Isles lie like a long mole before the North Sea, and for this reason the command of the outlets of the North Sea is very easy for them. The British ships are at all times near their bases of operations, and in the case of the English Channel there exists the further fact that the opposite coast belongs to the ally, France. The commercial blockade could and can be easily carried out by armed merchantmen, older cruisers and battleships, light cruisers and torpedo boats, so that the main British Fleet with its great battleships retains complete strategic freedom of action. Therein lay the danger for the small German Fleet, and therein lay also the military necessity of employing a strategy of reserve, so far as favourable opportunities did not present themselves. In view of the unfortunate geographic position of the North Sea, the cutting off of overseas traffic could not be prevented. It was also the intention of the British Fleet in the first days of the war to carry on a strategy of reserve in the North Sea, to employ good opportunities for making sallies, and also to attempt surprises. The cruiser battle in the Bay of Heligoland on August 28, 1914, was to be a surprise of this nature. It cost us some small cruisers, and it cost the attacking English squadron heavy damage, despite its great superiority. This battle was without any significance so far as the course of the war was concerned. It demonstrated again, however, the unfortunate geographical position of the German coasts; the English knew that the German Fleet could always be found in the so-called Bay of Heligoland, since we have no other harbours there. The British Fleet, on the other hand, which had before then frequently enough been hunted for by our torpedo-boats, was not tied to any definite place, but lay at some point on the coasts of Great Britain. It is highly probable that the leaders of Great Britain's campaign would have carried on a strategy of sorties alternating with one of holding back, in order, on the one side continuously to weaken the German Fleet without running any serious risk to themselves, and on the other, in order so to disorganise and provoke it that it would let itself be induced to enter a great deciding battle under unfavourable conditions and in an unfavourable position. These plans came to nought because of the entry into the naval warfare of a factor which the British Admiralty had not anticipated. This was the German submarine warfare—the war with mines and with submarines. Through the systematic stragetic employment of mines and submarines the German naval leaders have in a short time succeeded in making a continuous stay in the North Sea impossible for the British

main Fleet. Only occasionally since last fall have detachments of the main English Fleet made short, rapid sorties into the North Sea, only to return immediately to the Irish Sea or to the waters west and north of Scotland. This meant a shattering of all English plans of a military blockade of the German coasts, and of shutting the German naval forces up in the German harbours. The main British Fleet saw itself unable to command the North Sea. Even the mercantile blockade by British warships could not be maintained, since the German submarines had become too dangerous for the large British cruisers and other warships. Therefore the British Admiralty established a gigantic mine-field at the entrance to the North Sea from the English Channel, and proclaimed other portions of the North Sea a military zone which could be traversed by neutral ships only at their own risk. This was a violation of the rights of neutral shipping unheard of in history; the neutrals have endured it. The British Government simultaneously presented as the chief means of their campaign the starving out of the German people, and by doing so drove Germany to its submarine warfare on British commerce. This is still proceeding along the same lines. What successes it will achieve cannot at this time be definitely said. It is, however, certain that the submarine warfare has a growing influence upon the whole economic life of Great Britain. No one would have considered possible the things that the German submarines are here accomplishing and have accomplished. It stands without example. Nevertheless, Germany would certainly gladly stop this submarine war against commerce if, in return, the freedom and safety of all floating property at sea were guaranteed.

" It is plainly the standpoint of the British Admiralty to avoid serious encounter with the German Fleet except under especially favourable conditions. It fears that it would otherwise have too few ships left, and would be weaker at sea than the United States, after the war. Whether it will be possible for the British main Fleet to carry through this role depends also on many circumstances of political and economic nature. One can say, however, that the motives for holding back the main fleets on both sides are similar, despite the great inequality of the two fleets. In any event, it is correct to say that the great armoured ships do not come and fight for fear of the submarines; for there are many other reasons to be considered. We do not, it is true, command the North Sea without submarines, but we have through them made it impossible for the British Fleet to command the North Sea. That is the great, historically new event of this naval war. The German submarines have everywhere given astounding examples of their military powers. They have even voyaged from the North Sea to the Dardanelles, and have destroyed a number of English warships there. The two German cruisers ' Goeben ' and ' Breslau,' it is known, are in Turkish waters. At the beginning of the war they were in the Western Mediterranean, and they succeeded in getting through the whole French Fleet from Messina to the Dardanelles. In the Black Sea these two cruisers, in conjunction with the Turkish Fleet, have repeatedly

fought successfully against the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and the latter, despite its superior might, has never dared make an earnest attack in the Turkish waters of the Black Sea.

" The cruiser warfare on the seas was conducted independently of all actions. The few German cruisers here were from the start on a lost post. They had no supporting bases, and found themselves facing a tremendously superior force of British, French, Japanese, and Russian warships. Mr. Churchill has declared in the House of Commons that there were in all about 90 warships of every description hunting for the few German cruisers. Their situation was, therefore, extremely difficult, and their destruction earlier or later was assured. Their actions could, indeed, damage the enemy, but they could have no influence on the course of the war. Nevertheless, Count Spee succeeded with his squadron in destroying an English cruiser squadron on the Chilian coast. Spee's squadron was then destroyed by a tremendously superior enemy force in the battle off the Falkland Islands. An end was also put to the glorious career of the cruiser ' Emden.' Well-informed persons in Germany, as has been said, had never based any hopes on this cruiser warfare, for they knew that the forces were lacking to carry it out on a large scale, and for any long time. But the glory which the German sea-fighters have won for themselves on the oceans constitutes a lasting success and a gain which cannot be lost. In every contest they have demonstrated that they can be destroyed only by superior English forces, and that, ship for ship, they are superior to the English. We have experienced the same thing in the home waters, as, for instance, in the cruiser battle in the North Sea in January, 1915. Here, the German cruiser squadron was weaker, the English squadron was superior in ships and gun calibres. Despite this, the losses of the English squadron were very much the heavier; it lost the new battleship-cruiser ' Tiger,' the battleship-cruiser ' Lion ' was put out of action, and all the other cruisers were heavily damaged. On the German side, only the older cruiser ' Blücher ' was lost, which ought not to have been brought into the battle at all. The three German battleship-cruisers were hit by only two English projectiles, one of which glanced off the armour while the other did damage aft, without affecting the ship's fighting strength. Then, as on August 28th, and on the seas, it has always been manifest that the German ships shot better than the British.

" The losses of the German Fleet in the first year of the war are very small. It has lost not a single ship of the first class, but only a few submarines and torpedo boats, some small cruisers and a few older cruisers. The German Fleet looks to the future with confidence, and even though it has, because of the considerations referred to, carried on a strategy of reserve and of waiting, it has, on the other hand, repeatedly shown that it possesses full freedom of action in the North Sea. The German Fleet has coursed about in the North Sea a great number of times, and at times, as is known, has even advanced to the English coasts in order to bombard English coast defences and marine stations.

"The past 12 months have demonstrated that the days of absolute British supremacy are at an end. Ten years ago the Civil Lord of the British Admiralty, Mr. Lee, declared that the British Dreadnoughts would be on the German coasts before the news of the breaking out of war appeared in the German papers. The past 12 months have shown that Mr. Lee was a bad prophet. The German Fleet and the German people await with confidence the events of the coming 12 months."

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Balfour, Arthur James Balfour, 1st. Earl of
The navy and the war(August, 1914 to
August, 1915.)

DATE.	NAME OF BORROWER.